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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003474

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: RUMORS OF KORAN BURNING INCITE PROTESTS

Classified By: Political Counselor Annie Pforzheimer for reasons 1.4 (b)  
) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: A series of protests have broken out in several Afghan provinces over the past 10 days sparked by allegations that ISAF forces burned a copy of the Koran in a village near Kabul. Following initial protests in Nangarhar and Wardak provinces, several well-organized student protests occurred over the next several days in Kabul and several other provinces, and MPs debated the topic at Parliament. Protests spread in the wake of unsubstantiated media reports that ISAF forces burned a copy of the Koran while on patrol. A media intervention by the GIROA appears to have help calm the atmosphere. END SUMMARY.

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"Spontaneous" Protests Reported  
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12. (C) A protest broke out on October 19 at Nangarhar University, following several days of rumors circulating that an ISAF military patrol burned a copy of the Koran while conducting house searches in Wardak province, according to PRT Logar. PRT Khost reported a similar protest at Khost University on October 22, in which the students attempted to move the protest from Khost University to the city center but were persuaded to disperse by local authorities. PRTOffs reported similar protests in Parwan, Paktiya, and Herat provinces. PRTOff in Herat reported the Herat University students carried their protest from the school to the Governor's compound, whereupon they were joined by other protesters who were instigated by two local firebrand mullahs, known for their anti-coalition, anti-ISAF preaching. The crowd, estimated to number around 1,000, shouted slogans such as "Down with America", "Down with Israel", and, confusingly, "Down with the enemies of America". Protests at all locations were monitored by local security forces who reported no violence.

13. (C) Protests also took place in Kabul on October 25 and again on the 26th. On October 25, protests first took place at Kabul University, after which student protesters moved to Parliament. In contrast to the events at other locations, the protesters turned violent upon arrival at Parliament, pelting police with rocks and injuring several. Security officials arrested several of the protesters in response. Several members of Parliament met with protesters and promised to bring their concerns to the larger membership of Parliament. During Parliament's plenary session the following day, Speaker of the Lower House Qanooni advised MPs that outrage over allegations that US military forces had desecrated the Koran in Wardak province prompted protests throughout Afghanistan. Speaker Qanooni then initiated a conference call with Wardak governor Mohammad Fidai who informed MPs that ISAF forces searched houses following an IED detonation on October 13, but had not committed any such act of desecration.

14. (C) Following Governor Fidai's telephonic report to Parliament, several MPs made statements requesting restraint in the face of the rumors. One said, "The foreign soldiers

will never take such a mistake to burn the Holy Koran because it will never be in favor their national interests". Another said "This issue should be investigated because foreigners will not benefit from the burning of the Holy Koran, only our enemies will benefit".

15. (S) Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) Chairman Arghandewal told Ambassador Eikenberry on October 26 that the student protests were &supported by foreign elements.8 Arghandewal said he saw many black head scarves and &Hazara looking8 protesters as he traveled to the Embassy for his meeting with Ambassador Eikenberry, in his mind further confirming Iranian involvement. (NOTE: Ethnic Hazaras are a Persian-speaking Shi,a minority in Afghanistan).

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"Who You Gonna Call?"  
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16. (C) At an October 27, press conference at the Government Media and Information Center (GMIC), Governor Fidai stated that he dispatched five investigative teams and had gone personally to investigate these allegations. He said neither he nor his investigative teams found any evidence to support the claims that either ISAF or Afghan forces had done anything improper. Governor Fidai concluded that the rumors were the product of insurgents seeking to sow discord and discredit coalition forces. During his press conference Governor Fidai also detailed improvements made in Wardak province including new roads, six radio stations, 37 new schools, power generation improvements, and refurbishment of 300 mosques, all due to help from coalition partners.

KABUL 00003474 002 OF 002

Governor Fidai said it is these types of improved conditions that prompt insurgents to engage in propaganda activities, implying that insurgents had little else to offer.

17. (C) SUMMARY: The appearance of near-simultaneous student protests throughout Afghanistan certainly has an orchestrated feel; Afghan university students tend not to engage in &spontaneous8 nation-wide protests. It isn't at all clear, though, to whom the guiding hand belongs. Some sources tell us that Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) organizers put the students into play. At the same time, HIA Chairman Arghandewal alleged a malign influence of Iranians. Other sources advise that the MPs who spoke during the October 26 Parliamentary session were all opposition figures and that &showed8 the opposition had some role in putting the protest in motion. Wardak Governor Fidai's quick action to determine the facts, followed by his compelling statements made at the GMIC to a large domestic and international media audience debunking Koran burning reports did much to calm troubled waters.  
EIKENBERRY